

LEARNING OBJECTIVES – MAXIMIZING THE LEARNING ON A WORK TERM

CO-OP TIPS AND TECHNIQUES

Canadian Association for Co-operative Education (CAFCE),
Learning Objectives, Maximizing the Learning on a Work term'•

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If a tree falls in a forest and no one hears it, does it make a sound? If students learn on a work term, but they don't know what they have learned, has learning occurred?

To ensure the learning that occurs during a student's work term is recognized by all the stakeholders, UVic has incorporated having students write and evaluate learning objectives in our Employer/Student Evaluation forms. This process provides several benefits:

- Employers who have worked with students who use learning objectives appreciate the organization and direction that it provides for the co-op student. It shows that students are serious about learning during the work term.
- Learning objectives can give direction to what students learn during their work term. They can help students get more out of their coop experience and allow students to focus on their career goals.
- Learning objectives provide students with a listing (a portfolio) of documented learning outcomes resulting from their work term experience. This also helps give their Co-op experience more academic integrity by providing documentation of learning outcomes.

What are learning objectives?

A learning objective is a written statement describing measurable achievements students hope to accomplish during their work term experience. For example:

"By July 4th, I will devise, print and post a safety check sheet, following Federal Government guidelines, making safety information readily available to all staff members. I will have this safety check sheet evaluated by my supervisor for accuracy prior to posting."

Why use learning objectives?

The student's goal for each work term should be to maximize the opportunity and then be able to document what they have learned as a result of their participation in the Co-op program. To assist students in accomplishing this goal, it is recommended that students develop specific and measurable learning objectives for each of their Co-op work terms. By preparing learning objectives students are declaring their intentions to document their learning outcomes for the work term and to accomplish these objectives satisfactorily.

- *Co-op admission requirements include a combination of minimum 2.33GPA and application documents.*

Some work term assignments may lend themselves to easily written objectives but learning objectives can be written for every work term. The major idea behind setting objectives is not to control every moment of the Co-op experience but to set a direction or agenda for the work term.

How do you implement learning objectives?

The easiest way to incorporate learning objectives into the co-op work term is to incorporate them into the employer/student evaluation form. The Employer/Student Evaluation Form should have 3 sections:

Section 1: With the supervisor, during the first week of the work term, the student develops the learning objectives for the work term, following the model described later in this report.

The learning objectives which students develop should:

- relate directly to their job assignment, and
- represent the job functions and duties students will be performing during their co-op work term.

Section 2: With the supervisor, midway through the work term, the student evaluates the learning objectives, documenting any factors that may affect the achievement of the objectives. If needed, the objectives may be revised or updated. Coordinators normally review the objectives during the work site visit.

Section 3: With the supervisor, during the last week of the work term, the student evaluates the learning objectives against the set measurable goals. Again, any factors that affected the achievement of the objectives are documented.

These evaluations are returned to the Co-op office for review by the co-op coordinator.

The learning objectives that students develop for each Co-op work term should be realistic and achievable within the time frame of their work term assignment. Also, the objectives should be as specific as possible so that they can be measured at the end of the work term experience. There is no magic number of learning objectives that should be developed for each work term, but a good guideline would be for students to develop from 5 to 8 objectives for each work term.

How do you write learning objectives?

Writing SMART learning objectives is relatively easy. Smart objectives are:

- Specific
- Measurable
- Achievable
- Realistic
- Truthful

For each learning objective students have, ensure it answers the following four questions:

- What is the task to be accomplished?
- How will it be accomplished?
- How will it be measured/evaluated and by whom?
- When will it be completed?

Learning Objective- Bad Form: "I will learn to use a word processor."

Learning Objective- Good Form: "By August 15th, I will be able to execute Microsoft Word on a Macintosh computer incorporating advanced editing capabilities. I will attend a 2-day seminar on Microsoft Word and complete my work term report using the program for evaluation by my coordinator."

What are the types of learning objectives?

Learning objectives fall into two main categories:

Personal - include developing or improving interpersonal, communication or other social skills that allow students to work more effectively. For example:

"By the end of my work term (when), I will develop better listening skills (what) by practicing reflective questioning techniques (how), and I will submit a diary of these experiences to my supervisor for his/her evaluation (evaluation)."

Professional - include objectives aimed at practicing or improving a skill, learning a new task, solving a specific problem with measurable results or other professional objectives that would enable students to improve their work performance. For example:

"By July 1st (when), I will give a presentation to a group of at least ten people using a microphone and overheads (what). I will follow the guidelines outlined in the manual "Effective Presentations" (how) and will ask each participant to evaluate the presentation for clarity, style and message (evaluation)."

Some of the various topics that learning objectives may cover include:

- routine duties
- problem solving
- new skills and assignments
- personal improvement
- creative opportunities

And in summary:

Because it may be difficult for students to know exactly what they will be doing in their work term and what their employer will expect of students, it may take a lot of work to establish specific learning objectives before reporting to their work term assignment.

Therefore, during the first week of work, students should set some rather general objectives based on their job description and the preliminary knowledge that students have of the job and the employer. When their familiarity with their employer, supervisor and their job increases (usually after a few weeks), students should be able to set a more realistic number of learning objectives that students wish to accomplish during their work term. These may be the result of adapting their general objectives identified earlier or defining new objectives.

The first set of learning objectives students develop may be too optimistic, and students may have to postpone some of these until a future work term, or students may find that they need to identify more or the right learning objectives at the beginning. Students need to feel free to add new objectives and modify existing ones.

The above Co-op Tips & Techniques is brought to you by CAFCE's Accreditation Council in their effort to provide co-op practitioners with various topics relative to quality co-op programming.

WORK TERM LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Setting learning objectives at the beginning of each work term will help you maximize your work-term experience. In addition, setting objectives will help you define realistic targets for yourself, such as learning new skills and applying your knowledge from your course of study. Your supervisor should be aware of your goals and help you to develop them.

Your goals should be a combination of technical skills and knowledge, as well as more intangible items, such as an area of personal or professional growth you would like to develop during the work term. Remember to consider when, what, how, and your evaluation measurement when creating your objectives. Please be specific when outlining your objectives, as this will make reaching and evaluating your objectives easier. Also, include dates for anticipated completion.

During the site visit, your learning objectives will be discussed and evaluated with the following questions posed:

1. Are you meeting your objectives (answer with a 'yes' or 'no' and provide an explanation)?
2. Is additional learning happening during the work term that you did not anticipate?

Complete the following statement and e-mail it to your coordinator before you have completed the first month of your work term (see the example below). The subject line in your e-mail should be **Learning Objectives**.

The learning goals I have set for this work term include (minimum of 5):

Work term objectives:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

I have discussed these objectives with my supervisor: Yes No (if no, please explain)

Sample work term goals for a Syncrude Chemistry Co-op student might include:

1. Ensure my use of the specific analyzers for carbon, hydrogen, sulphur and nitrogen is accurate by May 20
2. Able to use Gas, Supercritical Fluid and High-Performance Liquid Chromatographs (see their book on lab booklet on "Using Chromatographs") by May 26
3. Ask my supervisor for feedback on how my skills on routine analytical tests are progressing by May 26
4. Attend one after-work function with colleagues to enhance networking opportunities, such as the golf fundraiser on June 6
5. Talk to fellow lab employees (John and Jane) about their career paths and advice they have for an upcoming graduate, including career advice for working at Syncrude, by June 13

I discussed these objectives with my supervisor on May 15.